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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated subjects' reactions to the suffering of another person, with subjects categorized on the basis of their own levels of previous physical punishment by their parents. Within the just world victim derogation paradigm, subjects observed a similar/dissimilar other receiving punishing shocks (as compared to a no-shock control). The results showed a significant interaction of earlier parental punishment with victim suffering, and there was a trend for a similar victim to be derogated more than the dissimilar victim. High punishment subjects derogated more than low punishment subjects for both variables. High punishment subjects' reactions indicated an increased sensitivity to suffering. The relevance of this study for just world and defensive attribution theories was discussed. (Author)

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Parental Physical Abuse and Reactions to Suffering in Others

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The role of physical violence on behavioral processes recently has come to be a topic of considerable concern. Largely related to the issue of violence on television and the modeling of violence, the topic has generated considerable controversy and some empirical data (Kaplan & Singer, 1976). In spite of the controversy, it is perhaps surprising that psychologists have allowed the topic to develop along such narrow lines; almost invariably the focus has been on children who watch television. Given the prevalence of violence of many kinds in contemporary society, analysis of its impact in ways other than passive observation (of television, of models, vicarious processes, etc.) might prove valuable. Furthermore, not only is violence often more ubiquitous than the fantasy form it takes on television, it also is more impactful on the individual than the passive observation model would indicate.

Direct violence appears widespread. In the family setting, for instance, Straus (1971) has reported that 50% of both a working class and a middle class sample of parents use threats of or actual physical punishment in child rearing. Perhaps even more relevant, Steinmetz (1974) has found that over 50% of her sample of college students reported parental abuse or threat of physical punishment in the last year of high school. On the basis of a survey by Erlanger (1974) it would appear a reasonable estimate that somewhere between 30% - 50% of American parents resort to physical punishment as a part of their treatment of their children; apparently a similar or perhaps somewhat lower number would apply to parents of college students.

From a psychological perspective, abusive experiences such as those involved in these statistics can be conceptualized as a developmental variable

with, at this time, relatively unknown effects on later behavior. Systematic investigation in this area would seem desirable.

As part of a larger series of investigations in the area of child abuse, per se, (Carrol & Reich, 1978; Reich, 1976), the author has been specifically concerned with abusive parents and therapeutic programs to aid them. One study on children themselves, however, (Bolton, Reich, & Gutierres, 1977) revealed that juvenile delinquent crime patterns differ for abused children and their siblings. The former were found to be most often arrested for escape and run-away crimes to the almost total exclusion of aggressive crimes, while their siblings were significantly more often arrested for the latter. In short, it was concluded that if an abused child is going to be arrested, the probability is strong that the crime will not be an aggressive one. In the absence of further studies on this topic no firm generalizations can be drawn, but the impact of abuse did appear to be significantly influential on interpersonal behaviors.

In the study reported here, we used a laboratory methodology to approach the variable of prior parental abuse as directly as possible. We simply sought to determine if students reporting a high level of previous parental abuse would respond differently from low abuse students in a situation designed to be infused with some degree of abuse and, importantly, suffering.

Two competing speculations could be proposed concerning the impact of abusive rearing conditions. On one hand, one might hypothesize that, all other factors held constant, persons who had been subjected to high levels of physical abuse would be relatively inured to suffering, hence have a raised threshold for perception of abuse and suffering in others, and consequently would be relatively unresponsive to suffering others. On the other hand, it could as readily be hypothesized that such developmental experiences would result in an intensification of social sensitivity, hence...a lowered threshold of responsiveness to abuse;

consequently, high abuse subjects would be predicted to more sensitized and reactive to abuse and suffering in others.

To analyze this differential prediction, a readily available research paradigm presented itself: the "just world" paradigm of Lerner (1974, 1977). Here the stimulus to the subject is a social one another person who is "suffering." One of the more surprising results in this research is that people have negative reactions to victims, even to the point that a completely undeserving victim, a suffering "martyr" is regarded more negatively than any other type of victim.

In explanation of the derogation effect, Lerner has constructed a hypothesis of "just world" motivations, stating in effect that observation of an innocent suffering other violates a preset belief in justice in the world in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. To resolve the discomfort produced by the injustice of seeing an innocent person suffering, the observer subject is led to conclude that the other is in fact an undesirable person, one who deserves to be suffering.

Relative to our contradicting predictions, the just world paradigm offers a technique whereby the possible outcomes of coming from an abusive background could be detected. If abuse renders one hardened and unresponsive, then seeing an innocent suffering other should not result in violation of just world beliefs, and hence no differential derogation of the other would result. On the other hand, if abuse renders one sensitized to abuse and suffering, then just world mortivations should be highly threatened by the observation of a suffering other, with consequent greater derogation of the victim. Both predictions are tied, as outcomes, to derogation as a dependent variable; this leaves open the question as to whether or not there is a direct relationship between background level of parental abuse and just world motivations, per se. Studies now in progress are exploring the relationship of these two variables per se.

In sum, this study was concerned with analyzing the effects of a punishing background on the evaluative reactions to an innocent suffering other. In the absence of any previous research directly on the topic, only the general predictions discussed earlier were made. Since the study was considered preliminary, involving a reanalysis of data gathered in a previous study, no conceptual distinctions were made between strong physical punishment, suffering, and feelings of personal victimization; clearly these are in need of further conceptual and empirical work.

Method

In overview, the study involved the addition of a variable assessing previous parental physical punishment onto a 2 X 2 design manipulating shock or no shock to a confederate actor who had been labeled as either similar or dissimilar to the subjects. A total of 131 subjects were run in the initial study. Scores on the background physical punishment variable (detailed below) were available on a total of 63 of those subjects.

In this experiment itself, the subjects first rated themselves on the 15 bipolar adjective scales used by Lerner and Simmons (1966), then observed via videotape a female either receiving punishment shocks or no shocks in a supposed learning experiment, and then rated her on the same rating scales. The major dependent variable was the difference score, victim - self. Subjects also rated the degree of stress in the situation faced by the girl and the amount of stress they personally felt.

A multifaceted opinion and trait questionnaire administered to all introductory psychology students (from which this sample was taken) several months earlier had included a special "Family Relations Survey", part of the investigator's child abuse research. It contained 33 questions concerning parent-child relations, patterns of obedience and discipline, liking for parents, etc. A factor analysis of it revealed a clear 2-item cluster concerning direct

physical striking by parents (and threats thereof) within the previous 2-3 years. Subjects were scored on this factor by obtaining the mean of their answers on 5-point scales of how true the events were of them. The items were: (1) "I have been deliberately hit by one of my parents in the past 2-3 years" and (2) "My mother/father threatened to hit or beat me within the past 2-3 years." About 30% of our sample answered somthing more than "Not True" to these items. It seemed necessary in this initial study to approach the abuse variable as directly and as simply as possible; the face valid items appeared to be the most promising to get at the background variable as we conceptualized it.

The responses showed that a majority of the subjects, 42, scored as low as possible on these items, and that 19 had a score higher than that. The former were categorized as low abuse subjects, and the latter as highs. This factor became our third 2-level factor in the post hoc reanalysis of the data of the original study, generating a 3-way unequal Ns design; Ns in the cells varied from 3 to 12. No systematic factors were responsible for the loss of questionnaire responses for the remaining original subjects.

Results

The manipulation check item concerning the amount of stress perceived in the situation revealed only one significant effect, a main effect for shock, F (1, 59) = 3.46, $p < .06$, with greater distress perceived in the shock condition. The item assessing subjects' personally felt levels of distress revealed only one significant effect, also for the shock variable, F (1, 59) = 6.80, $p < .01$, with the shock cells resulting in higher levels of felt distress.

For the main variable of derogation, there was a significant main effect for shock, with shock resulting in higher derogation than no shock, F (1, 59) = 6.12, $p < .02$. Also significant, however, was the interaction of subjects' own punishment and suffering of the victim, F (1, 59) = 4.99, $p < .03$. Means for the

4 conditions were: low abuse, no shock, 9.31; low abuse, shock, 10.64; high abuse, no shock, .88; high abuse, shock, 16.64. The means are displayed in Figure 1. Mean tests revealed that the significance was related to the difference

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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between the two no shock/shock means within the high punishment subjects, t (1, 19) = 3.00, $p < .01$. No other main effects or interactions were significant. An investigation of the means revealed that high punishment subjects tended to derogate the similar shock victim much more negatively than they did the shock dissimilar victim; the difference was not statistically significant, however.

Discussion

The data provided some insight into the issues raised in the introductory section. There was in fact differential derogation of the suffering learner as a function of the subjects' own levels of physical punishment received from their parents. Those subjects who reported having been threatened with and actually having received physical punishment of some degree demonstrated significantly greater amounts of victim derogation than those reporting low levels. The former apparently were more sensitive to the punishment being delivered to the learner and consequently were more threatened by it in the sense of threat defined by the just world hypothesis. It should be noted, however, that no differential levels of personal discomfort were reported by the subjects, so the resultant judgments appear to have been more cognitively than emotionally-based.

Since this study we have pursued this topic with several additional studies and have obtained similar results for the abuse variable; the effect appears to be a reasonably stable one. Most of our subsequent work has involved psychometric issues, attempts to develop stable factors concerning reported abuse and other aspects of parental training.

There is a possibility that other theoretical conceptions could be applied to these data. The instructions to the subjects did not explicitly exclude the possibility that the subjects themselves might be asked to participate in the learning situation also and thus they may have been at least somewhat threatened by the possibility that they also may have been shocked. Defensive attribution theory (Chaikin & Darley, 1973; Shaver, 1970) would predict derogation in such circumstances: In order to avoid the cognitive stress of such a situational threat, the subjects would attribute causality to something negative about the actor in the situation, not the situation itself, and thus achieve some defense against the threat. Although there is no evidence that such motivations were or could be present in our subjects, the possibility does exist and must remain indeterminate at this time. Future studies can clarify the matter by manipulating directly situational threat.

Although not formally discussed here, an internal analysis of the data revealed the similarity variable to have differentiating effects on derogation. We found greater derogation for the <u>similar</u> other, but although quite separate the means were not statistically significantly different. The findings is an intriguing one for it contradicts most derogation studies which almost invariably find greater attributional lenience and/or lowered derogation for a similar other. From our perspective, we would expect a lowered threshold of sensitivity to suffering in similar others, hence greater derogation, so a theoretical issue appears to be involved in that finding. Studies now in progress in our laboratory are pursuing this and related issues.

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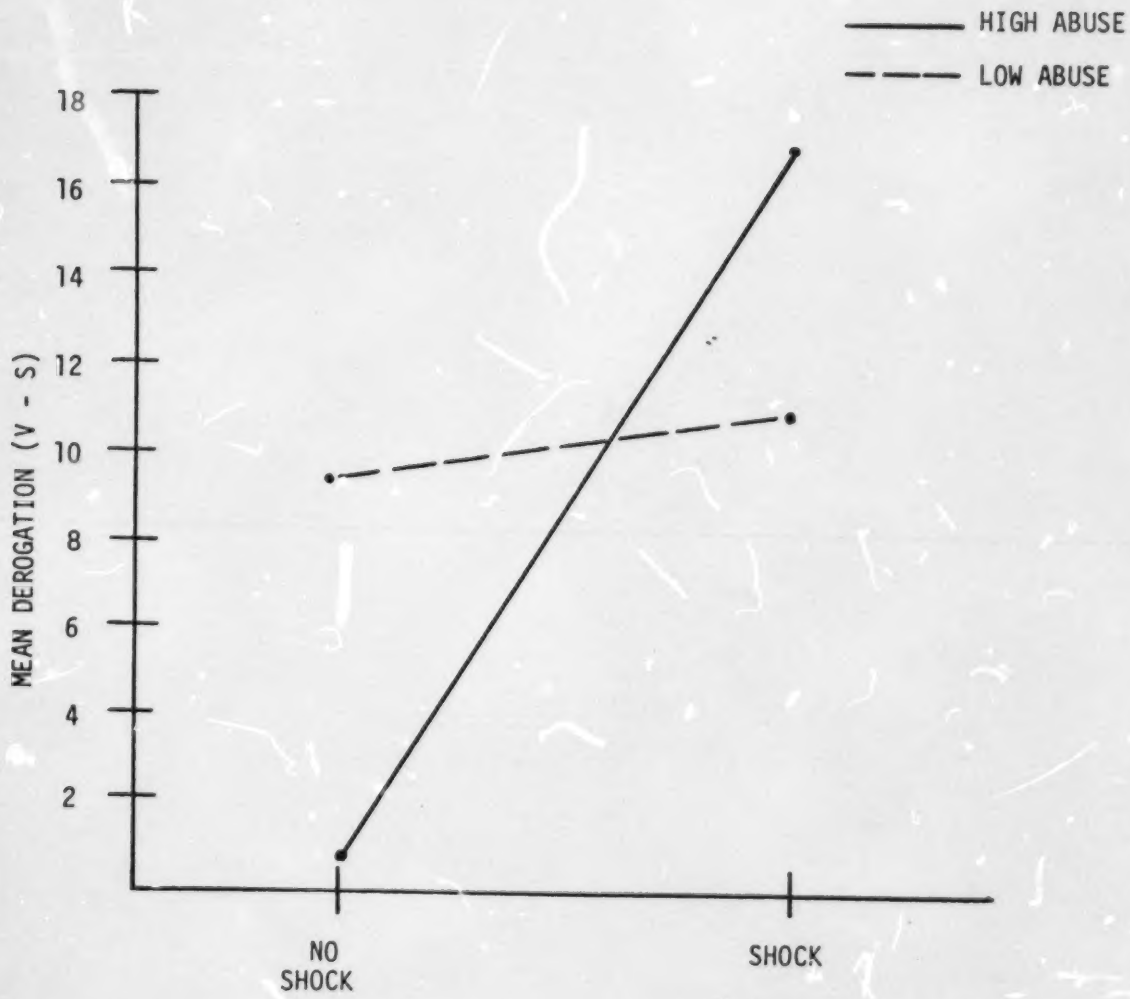

Fig. 1. Means of the 4 experimental conditions for the Suffering X Groups interaction.